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ABSTRACT

The Carnegie Branch of the Houston Public Library (HPL) has attempted to establish credibility in a low income, Spanish speaking neighborhood by making the library visible to individuals on the street, contacting community leaders, and working with dropouts. The Branch, selected to implement a Neighborhood Information Center (NIC), established a shopping center book table and canvassed the community to distribute library cards. The shopping center distribution was quantitatively successful; both methods permitted the staff to meet non-library users. The Library established cooperation with the Mexican American Education Council, resulting in consideration of a cooperative learning center and community education program. Programs for the aging and Adult Basic Education (ABE) were established. The Library discovered, however, that guidelines and limits were needed for community group activities within the library. Experience showed that: (1) ABE programs help identify and serve non-library users; (2) agency cooperation enhances the possibility for success; (3) credibility must be established with community agencies and leaders to achieve cooperation; and (4) materials in a particular language must be available to serve the needs of a language group. Through the NIC, support from the HPL, and staff committed to community service, the Branch achieved the communication of innovative active in the community. (Author/KP)

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AN EXPERIMENT IN LIBRARY COMMUNICATIONS

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September 28, 1976

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The Carnegie Branch of the Houston Public Library has attempted over the past three and one half years to establish credibility in a predominantly low income, Spanish speaking neighborhood. The purpose of this article is to introduce the reader to basic principles used by the author and staff in their attempt to change the public image of the branch. This is not a success story, trial and error have been the norm, much frustration with some satisfaction. We now know certain principles of communication ~~of innovation~~ and marketing work, others do not. It is a story we have been encouraged to tell.

First, a description of the Carnegie neighborhood. Located on the Houston near Northside and considered a low income barrio by many of its residents, the neighborhood has experienced many changes over the past twenty-five years. Most middle and higher income anglos and Mexican Americans have moved to the suburbs, creating a void that has been filled by low income Mexican Americans, illegal aliens, and low to moderate income Mexican National families. Those who have elected to stay or could not move include some elderly anglos, middle income Mexican Americans, but mostly low income Mexican American families. The latter makes up that group of people who have been most stymied in their attempt to achieve any kind of upward mobility, giving in finally, to apathy that can be sensed most keenly in the underachieving youth of the neighborhood.

These changes have had the effect of disorienting previous staffs at the Carnegie branch. Drug abuse, break-ins, loss of library users who feared the changing environment, drop in circulation, combined disrupted staff morale. In a four year period, 1970-73, three new branch heads were appointed with hopes of giving the library a new sense of direction. I was the third to be hired, accepting the position in the summer of 1973.

It did not take long to realize the complexity of the problems faced by the staff. Starting with the opening day of school: a couple of young dropouts from broken homes and who had completed time in state reformatories began making their presence felt. Gang fights broke out, automobiles were damaged, personal threats were made against members of the staff.

My first responsibility as I saw it was to establish rapport with the community, make the library visible to the average individual in the street, identify leaders in the community, establish a working relationship organization having similar concerns, create viable programs for the dropouts.

Being new in the community made my task difficult, far more questionable was my being anglo with no Spanish language abilities. Rogers and Shoemaker lent me comfort in their book Communication of Innovations in which it was pointed out that empathy is a necessary ingredient for effecting change, that in fact, heterophilous persons having high empathy are in a social psychological sense, really homophilous.[1] My empathy had its roots in a belief that positive change was and is possible. In addition, I could see in the near Northside community an opportunity to implement theories in the communication of innovations that had been gained at the School of Information Studies, Syracuse University.

Fortunately, the Houston Public Library had selected the Carnegie Branch as one of two sites to implement the Neighborhood Information Center concept. The coordinator of that service, Mr. Guadalupe Mier lent much moral support to the goals and objectives I attempted to convey to the staff in an effort to relate the library to community needs.

My primary goal was to establish credible visibility for the library in the community. This could not be accomplished in the library, people were not coming, that was part of the problem, therefore, we had to go to the people. Dr. Doug Zweizig's study of library users (doctoral dissertation, Syracuse University, 1973)[2] gave me encouragement to go out into the community, meet the public face to face. Katz and Lazarsfeld in their book Personal Influence speak at length about the role of personal influence and contact in selling new ideas or products.[3] First however, I had to become familiar with the near Northside.

To become more familiar with the neighborhood, staff members took me on guided tours, pointing out major institutions such as schools, community centers, churches. Later, driving around, riding a bicycle, walking to the bus stop I was little by little able to identify clinics, major businesses and industry, family bakeries-taverns, Saturday night dance halls. Particular attention was paid to architectural styles which dated the community, supporting

my hunch about many of the early homes being built to provide housing in close proximity to the Southern Pacific Railroad shops (which is still the major industry on the Northside).

In addition, information compiled in NIC studies was read, along with census tracts, although I had some difficulty here due to the fact that Mexican Americans were equated with anglos. By the end of a year I knew Lorraine, Hogan, and Crockett streets were one and the same road; Fiesta Mart was one of the key shopping centers in the community; Wesley House Community Center and Casa de Amigos were two key community centers and other information that would at a later date be used to implement programs compatible with my basic goal.

The first project designed to strengthen community awareness was to set up a card table in a local grocery store: from that vantage point we would circulate library books. We took a portable bookcase, supply of Spanish books and novellas, signs advertizing our service, an enthusiastic librarian, and a scared bilingual desk assistant. We stayed at the Big Seven store for two hours, had pictures taken (they never did make Library Journal or the Wilson Library Bulletin), checked out one book and three library cards. We repeated the process at Big Seven and one other location with no success at checking out books (selection was too small and looked more like a used book sale than library service). But we learned from experience--library cards were more popular and could be issued with little difficulty.

This service to community nodes became standard procedure by January 1974. On occasion negative responses were received, e.g. one black mother told her young daughter: "don't take that card, the library just want to rip you off". On the other hand we found a number of people who were enthusiastic about our service. We frequently met people from other cities, New Orleans, Chicago, Los Angeles, who were moving to Houston: we issued them cards on the spot.

In order to identify people who were receiving this service, we flagged their cards prior to mailing. If they came to use our service, we could identify them by the specially marked card. We missed an opportunity when we did this though, for had we devised a simple packet giving instructions on how to use the library and the various services offered, we could have provided

these instructions to new library users. Such a packet is now being developed.

Closely related to the community node service has been the canvassing project. Originally begun with the Neighborhood Information Center program to identify community needs and marketing the new service, canvassing is now an ongoing service of the library. Every member of the staff has gone out into the community except the janitor. We have been chased by dogs (bit on one occasion), had doors shut in our faces, been invited in for coffee and warmly greeted. In the summer of 1974 we distributed more than one thousand library cards.

Problems experienced with this means of communicating the library include: (1) at least ten percent of the cards are returned undeliverable for such reasons as "moved, left no address; "occupant does not live at this address" (in a number of instances, the post office made the error). (2) Library policy tended to be inflexible, confirming fears of people who were hesitant about our service. The best example was the mother, baby and grandmother who walked nearly a mile to come to the library after we had given them a card at their home. About six weeks later this same mother was charged with a fine for bringing her books a week late.

Door to door canvassing differs from shopping center distribution of cards. We appear less anonymous when at an individual's home than when meeting him/her at a shopping center. We have also noticed that people contacted at their homes have been more responsive to our service.

We have been able to establish the following principles regarding distribution of library cards: (1) shopping center distribution permits quantitative success (about 25 cards per hour, canvassing results in about 15 per hour. (2) Working in pairs, whether in shopping centers or canvassing is suggested. (3) A higher level of anonymity is experienced in shopping centers than in home canvassing. (4) Both methods provide the staff opportunity to meet much of the non-library user public. (5) Staff and library policy should establish compatibility with introducing new users to library service (care should be taken to offer adequate indoctrination to new users). (6) A high rate of return cannot be expected from such community contact (during the summer of 1974, 3% of the people contacted returned to use

the library, a number of whom have already moved to new locations. (7) Such service should be provided on a regular basis, especially in communities having transient populations.

A personal objective was to contact and become familiar with as many community leaders as possible. I knew from previous community experience this would take time. Also, developing credibility between community agencies guarding their funded projects could not be developed overnight. I visited schools, community centers, churches and ministers, day care centers, clinics, the YMCA, Salvation Army, senior citizen groups whenever possible. In addition, ways were found to provide service to agencies, including book deposits, programs, and when possible, participating in cooperative projects. I attended meetings, listened to community concerns, learned much about problems that plagued the near Northside.

It was early in this phase of learning about the community that I became familiar with the Mexican American Education Council. In that we had mutual community interests, we established an early relationship, in fact, until its disbandment in the summer of 1976, the Carnegie Branch and MAEC were able to support each other in key areas of service. We were both concerned about communtiy and educational conditions, holding separate meetings attempting to find solutions. By October 1974 it became apparent cooperative meetings would be far more effective, for that reason, my support was given to MAEC rather than move in separate ways.

The Mexican American Education Council coordinated a series of monthly parent meetings at the Wesley Community Center. Attendance grew as we attempted to sound out problems. I say we, I was a participant, and meetings were conducted in Spanish, MAEC conducted the meetings. Here I began to learn about the tensions between the Mexican Americans and Mexican Nationals (otherwise known as wetbacks, spiks, croakers). School conditions were highlighted, i.e. less than satisfactory fire protection; deteriorated buildings; overcrowded conditions. The drug issue was also voiced. Youth were sniffing inhalents such as liquid shoe polish, liquid paper, paint thi ner,

glue, carburator cleaners. The attrition rate at the junior high school was over 50% among Mexican American students. Lack of bilingual educational programs also surfaced as a major problem.

The conflict between Mexican Americans and Mexican Nationals was probably the most revealing issue to me in these meetings. Until then, I was not aware that the cause of numerous after school fights on library grounds between junior high students revolved around this issue, increasing in intensity near exams, Christmas vacation, the end of school. Not just the youth, parents espoused similar attitudes. Whereas the Mexican Americans at lower income levels experienced economic deprivation, Nationals came to Houston with a sense of hope, or if they were illegal aliens, were willing to work for the barest minimum wages. In either case, third or fourth generation Mexican Americans were threatened by the newcomers and passed these feelings on to their children.

Attending various meetings was part of my strategy of getting involved. It also helped me establish working relations with community people and develop visibility. Through out my three years in the near Northside a network of cooperation has been built. Isolated incidents made that relationship tenuous at times, such as when a middle aged man had to be removed from the library because of continued obscene gestures made toward the staff (I suspected mental illness which was verified), only to learn his father was a well respected leader in the Chicano community. We were also working in a tense situation with the youth which could quickly erupt into confrontation. Attending the meetings helped me keep library goals in perspective.

The library has experienced its poorest results with school dropouts. Previous librarians met with a similar sense of failure: the harder we tried to understand the needs of youth, the greater the problem. During school hours, a small core of about fifteen youths used the library to skip classes, sniff glue and other inhalents, keep out of sight of police. If we tried to break up fights, we could expect breakins or damage to personal property. During library hours, the library had become dropout turf.

In retrospect, an incident that could have been less than amusing occurred when a few of the kids stole a workman's family supper from his unlocked pickup truck. He was so outraged when he got home, he called the library to inform us the hotdogs were baited with rat poison: whoever stole them had to be warned of the danger. By coincidence, we were expecting an exterminator to put out poison for the purpose of eliminating rats in the building. We thought it was the pest control company who had called (the caller did not identify himself, I did not ask for particulars as it was five minutes before closing and knew if the young people had eaten the food, serious consequences could result). We called the poison control center in Galveston, local radio stations and hospitals. We found one of the boys and some evidence of the hotdogs, but no sickness. The next day the papers played up the hoax...we took it the best we could.

In spite of our efforts to work with the kids, we never did make any headway. The most successful venture evolved with the development of a Northside Community Council. Centered around the YMCA and Harris County Juvenile Probation Department in cooperation with local agencies, the purpose of the council was to come up with viable programs designed to help pre-delinquent juveniles develop alternatives to delinquency. Two projects were developed by the YMCA staff: a wilderness survival course and a mini-bike training program. The library supported the projects with tutoring resources.

I did make one other attempt to work with the dropouts in addition to an alternative school program at one of the local community centers. One of the dropout leaders was hired as a page on the staff, working in the children's room. An officer of the Harris County Juvenile Probation Department talked to the staff about such a possibility, how we should relate to "J.J.", what we could expect from him. For a number of reasons the young man quit after three months, the most serious being incompatible misconceptions between staff and "J.J." He could sense the distance developing, would come to

work glassy-eyed, sometimes late, or simply not show up. It was like a case of self-fulfilling prophecy: the young man imaged himself and had an image projected upon himself that he confirmed. From the experience I learned the following: (1) no matter how good the intentions, if staff support is lacking, chances of success can be diminished. (2) The library staff was not equipped to assume rehabilitation of a youth, it was wrong on my part as branch director to extend such a responsibility to them.

Cooperation with the Mexican American Education Council led to the formation of a Mexican Folkloric dance group at the Carnegie Branch. Classes were held five days a week for elementary through high school age students. Holding classes in the library proved to be advantageous and dysfunctional for the library. The library and MAEC received wide television and newspaper coverage in response to performances by the group. On the other hand, high noise level, scheduling of classes, conflicts between the dance teacher and branch staff disrupted staff morale. Because new people were attracted to the library including students, parents, and observers, I chose to continue dance practice in the library. While I was away from the branch on a business trip, the staff signed a letter taken as an ultimatum by MAEC to have classes removed from Carnegie. Parents of the students became indignent, calling a meeting to which members of the staff, myself, and the chief of branches for HPL was invited. Ensuing discussion between MAEC and branch staff further eroded staff morale: within a year, four of eleven members of the staff either resigned or transferred to other libraries.

In evaluating the above events, I take blame for what happened: first, in my desire to have the library used by the community, loosely restricted use of the library was offered to interested agencies. MAEC, a senior citizen's group, the Northside Community Council, Houston Community College, Pan American Golfer's Women Auxiliary, Los Podrinos responded at one time or another to the invitation, most on an ongoing basis. Proper guidelines and limits were not set

concerning library use. Second, lack of communication with staff on my part as an innovator was a contributing factor to lowering staff morale. I knew this could happen: introduction of change most always has a dibilitating effect--I did not take this factor seriously enough.

In spite of the tensions that surfaced, significant benefits resulted from our liaison with MAEC that will have long range impact on the Houston near Northside. During the past three years a small group of people from the community including MAEC, the Houston Community College Adult Learning Center, Houston Independent School District Community Education program, Wesley Community Center and others brainstormed the feasibility of building a cultural/learning center in the northside. Within two years, people from the Houston Independent School District-Houston Community College, Mexican American Education Council, and head of branch services of the Houston Public Library were openly talking about a cooperative learning center complex. By the spring of 1975 much was being said about such a complex at the administrative levels, but not in a common setting. During that period when staff morale was at its lowest, I approached Mr. DeAnda of MAEC about the dilemma, his immediate reaction was: "I'll call a meeting and invite all interested parties to discuss the learning center concept." The idea of his calling the meeting seemed preposterous, but the response was favorable. Directors of Houston Independent School District, Houston Community College, City Parks, Houston Public Library, City Planning, and MAEC attended. Initial response to the July 9th, 1975 meeting was enthusiastic and was agreed all parties involved should write preliminary proposals for a learning center complex for presentation at a September meeting. The second meeting was received as favorably as the first, participants freely voicing reservations and hopes for the concept. After the September meeting the issue faded into the background, not to emerge again until March 1976.

In the meantime, the Houston Independent School District implemented a community education plan based on the Flint, Michigan model. Jefferson Davis High School, neighboring the Carnegie Branch, was selected as one of the pilot schools. Texas A&M University provided consultants for HISD: they foresaw the role Carnegie Branch could have in community education and supported the idea of a cooperative facility that would include public/school libraries, community college classrooms, multi-media facilities, and public meeting space.

The director of the Houston Public Library included among other items, the Carnegie Branch in the city bond election for March 1976. If the issue passed, the branch would be allocated $650,000 for renovation and improvement of branch facilities. The election passed by a two to one margin and again interest in the learning center proposal surfaced. Since then additional meetings have been held, the matter has been presented to city council, and is assured of receiving council's approval.

Probably one of the highlights of the learning center issue surfaced over use of community development funds for Carnegie. An amount of $350,000 was suggested for branch improvement, only to be withdrawn at a later date. When news about withdrawal of funds was received, twelve community representatives appeared before a Community Development budget hearing at city hall. Those attesting to the validity of service at Carnegie included a school principal, community agency leaders, parents, precinct representative, house wives. By the end of the afternoon, some councilmen acknowledged they had been born and raised on the Northside, used the library in question, funds would be restored.

Our exposure to the needs of senior citizens began with providing book deposits at local senior citizen centers. Early 1974 a small group of retired people from the Holy Name Catholic Church inquired about available space in the library for weekly meetings. At the time I was soliciting groups to use the facilities. Approval was given the group for a Friday meeting. Eighteen charter members voted to identify themselves as the "Magic Years Club". The group has grown to

over 75 members: on any given Friday at least thirty-five are in attendance. Bridge, poker, dominoes, monthly birthday parties, meals, outside speakers, and business meetings make up the agenda.

As a result of these efforts, a branch aging project was located in the Carnegie Branch. Funded by an L.S.C.A. grant, a large print book collection has been developed. Materials and equipment were purchased including games in large print, braille, Spanish; an assortment of magnifiers and readers aids were made available; the Spanish book collection was improved.

With the aging grant the library has been able to provide additional support to local agencies serving the elderly. Programming is scheduled at seven centers on a monthly basis. Home visits are made. Canvassing of the community to ascertain needs takes place weekly (senior citizens have been introduced to ESL classes, others have become regular library users).

An attempt was made to establish a senior citizen's project with a local church. The coordinator of the aging program at Carnegie worked with the program and established an extensive book collection. Lack of an adequate needs assesment and immediate expectations resulted in discouragement on the part of the pastor. The aging coordinator has continued to be in contact with the church but as of this writing the effort is dormant.

Rogers and Shoemaker suggest at least three responses to innovative activities.[4] Functional versus dysfunctional, i.e. if an innovation results in opposite or negative purposes it can be dysfunctional. In a sense the dance classes were dysfunctional, staff disunity resulted. Manifest versus latent consequences: a desired end is sought, when achieved, latent manifestations occur which may or may not benefit the original goal. Our relationship with school dropouts is an example of a latent manifestation. Attempting to establish rapport with the youth later resulted in loss of regular library users. Then there are direct versus indirect consequences. A direct goal of the library was to become visible in the community. An indirect consequence of efforts was the establishment of programs such as the Adult Basic Education project, Magic Years Senior Citizens group, expanding

the Spanish Book collection. From these experiences we can deduce: the innovator must expect surprises, pleasant and unpleasant. If the unexpected is not anticipated, long range goals can be lost in immediate successes or conflicts.

One of the more extensive indirect results of Carnegie staff becoming visible in the community was the establishment of an Adult Basic Education program. Service to agencies and contact with the Houston Community College provided the basic groundwork. This included setting up book collections some of which were used for tutoring as at the Salvation Army, YMCA, and Casa de Amigos. Others were used to support ongoing education programs and recreational reading. Monthly visitation with these and other agencies helped establish a sense of credibility and rapport on the part of the library.

A proposal titled "Basic Education and Information Support Program for the Disadvantaged" was submitted to the Texas State Library. Designed to include three branch libraries and the Central library, a basic goal was to identify and establish rapport with community agencies involved in Adult Basic Education. The libraries would be support agencies, establishing in-house educational efforts and providing resources to similarly minded community agencies. The proposal was received favorably with an L.S.C.A. grant of $56,000.

In that Houston Community College had established an ABE program in the city of Houston and cooperating with most other agencies than the public library, I made it a point to become involved with the college. This included attending certification sessions for teachers, visiting learning centers, and seeking advice for our own program. One significant meeting that was to influence the future of the library's ABE program was held in November 1975. The director of the college's ABE, the head of a learning center, the chief of HPL's branches, and myself attended. It was at that time the director of HCC became committed to a coordinated effort on the part of both agencies to meet the needs of people.

During this same period of time Brenda Dervin of the School of Communications, University of Washington held a workshop in conjunction with the ABE project. Fifteen agencies were invited

and participated.

These two events helped turn the corner for HPL's ABE project. In January the Houston Community College established a tutoring project for branch libraries using library resources and volunteer tutors. By June ten libraries were participating. Fifteen branches were involved in September and the college had funded four branch learning centers including equipment, materials, and qualified part time teachers. In addition, one branch library has become a major resource center for one of the college's high school campuses. That library now remains open four nights a week rather than the usual two, added expenses being paid for by the college.

In the two years I have been working with ABE, GED, and ESL the following has been learned: (1) the need for such programs is not limited to low income areas. (2) An ABE program provides the library with an excellent opportunity to identify and serve that segment of the community otherwise known as non-library users. (3) Agency cooperation enhances the possibility for success. (4) Credibility must be established in the community with agencies and leaders in order to achieve cooperation.

In order to serve the needs of a particilar language group materials in that language must be provided by the library. This obvious reasoning is dependent on at least two things: availability of desired materials and money. The Carnegie Branch had a collection of 500 books in Spanish when I arrived. As an attempt was made to make the library visible to the community it became necessary to purchase additional Spanish materials. Previous branch librarians attempted to use part of their budget to purchase Spanish books but were discouraged by the city's purchasing policies and the failure of book jobbers to supply materials when money was available. We continue to be frustrated by these same problems. Nevertheless, in three years we have been able to increase our Spanish collection to over 4,000 books. Twenty-five percent of our current budget is committed to Spanish purchases, and it is anticipated within three years to have a collection of 7,000 books. Through these efforts it is now estimated 1,000 Spanish materials are circulated monthly.

In conclusion, three things have made it possible for the Carnegie Branch to become a more visible entity in the community: (1) The Neighborhood Information Center; (2) a committed staff; (3) much encouragement and support from Mr.David Hennington, director of the Houston Public Library and Mr. Len Radoff, Chief of Branches.

The Neighborhood Information Center provided a base from which additional programs could spin off. Mr. Lupe Mier established the NIC program at Carnegie, and though he was involved in many other activities, his creativity in developing radio and television, newspaper support made it possible for the Carnegie Branch to be put in the minds of the people in the Houston northside. Although NIC began as a seemingly separate service of the library, it was integrated as a unit within a year. All Staff members canvassed in those first months of 1973,'74. All staff members can answer NIC questions, offer professional referral, are willing to not only answer questions but provide transportation, translation service, make telephone calls for people in need. Out of a staff of eleven at Carnegie, seven are bilingual meaning that at any given day the branch is open, NIC calls can be answered in Spanish.

Second, the Carnegie staff is committed to community service. Sometimes we are referred to as "welfare librarians" which we are and are not. The staff is committed to the principle of community librarianship, helping students with homework, answering reference questions, keeping the card catalog and book collection up to date. True, the staff cannot be all things to all people, limits can be reached as with the dance group conflict. Yes, as branch librarian I made decisions contrary to good management, but in the interest of an ultimate goal. In some instances the goal could have been better achieved through compromise and open communication. In spite of this, or the drugs, threats, lack of heat for one whole winter, the staff has basically stayed together as a unit. New concepts are considered as a staff, resulting at this point in time, anticipation for the future. A new form of library service is just around the corner for the Carnegie Branch, a form of service that will tax our ingenuity and skills at communicating. We are anticipating the future.

Finally, enough cannot be said for the support given the Carnegie Branch by the Houston Public Library director and the chief of branches. They were willing to risk book collections, listen to our fears and anxieties, hear out pipe dreams. And, they were able to temper enthusiasm with sound judgment. They were the ones who implemented many of the programs that are now a reality, we simply initiated the ideas.

These are the results of three years work at the Carnegie Branch Library. A concept has been achieved through team effort, that concept is a process: the communication of innovationary activity. It is an on going process, the test of which is credibility. We believe at Carnegie that our efforts to introduce the library to the community in the manner we have has begun establish at least a semblance of credibility.

FOOTNOTES:

[1]Rogers, Everett M. and F. Floyd Shoemaker: Communication of Innovations (New York: Free Press, 1971), p. 14.

[2]Zweizig, Douglas L.: "Predicting Amount of Library Use: an Empirical Study of the Role of the Public Library in the Life of the Adult Public" (unpublished Doctor's dissertation, Syracuse University, 1973).

[3]Katz, Elihu and Paul F. Lazarsfeld: Personal Influence (New York: The Free Press, 1955).

[4]Rogers and Shoemaker, op. cit., pp. 330-334.